

CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT IN INTERNATIONALLY DELIVERED DUAL AWARDS: ITS ROLE IN ENSURING STANDARDS ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Many Universities engage in Transnational Education (TNE) where their programmes are delivered at a branch campus located in an overseas country, or in partnership with a local higher education provider based in another country. There are many drivers for this approach including: the internationalisation of the home curriculum and student experience; the opportunity to promote student mobility through exchange programmes or short study experiences; demographic issues such as diminishing numbers of international students applying to study at the home institution; political factors including changes in immigration laws; financial objectives such as diversification of revenue streams building research or industrial networks; building the University brand overseas.

There are various models for TNE including validated programmes, franchised delivery, joint or dual degrees, dual awards, twinning arrangements.

This paper builds on previous work where one particular model for TNE, namely the dual award, was investigated. In this paper the authors turn their attention to the structural issues in the creation of a dual award. The paper investigates in depth a topic that arose and was touched upon briefly in previous work namely whether a programme of study is more than just the summation of its constituent learning outcomes.

The paper considers a novel implementation of a dual award whereby the curriculum followed by the students is the locally validated programme rather than the curriculum of the home institution. In order to make the award, the international partner curriculum has been mapped closely against that of the home institution. The mapping is carried out at a detailed level in order to establish that both the high level programme outcomes and the lower level module outcomes of the home institution's programmes are all appropriately addressed by those of the international partner institution's curriculum.

The analytical approach adopted applies the work carried out on Constructive Alignment by John Biggs to evaluate the extent to which the mapping between curricula is sound and robust enough to ensure that standards at both institutions can be established and verified. Using Biggs approach, the authors put a clear focus on module level outcomes as being the locus of interest. From this point the coverage of programme level outcomes can be established and the application of student assessment can be monitored. By using module level outcomes as the key binding element within one programme, the horizontal relationship between module level outcomes in the home institution's and the partner's programmes provides the reassurance of comparability (the parity of standards) in the design of the programmes.

The paper concludes that through the application of constructive alignment a relative judgement can be made to satisfy the quality assurance requirements of both institutions and of external auditors. It goes on to pose an interesting follow-up question in that it may be possible to establish equivalence in standards but that there might be significant differences in the quality of the student experience.

Keywords: Constructive alignment, dual award, transnational education.

1 INTRODUCTION

The process of the design and delivery of a dual award is potentially one of high risk due to the differing regulatory frameworks, cultural issues and quality and standards regimes applied by the contributing partners. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the potential for Constructive Alignment in providing a mechanism for addressing some of these aspects of risk when engaging in Transnational Education. In doing so it is hoped to offer assurance to students, employers and review and audit agencies that the standards of the qualification are being maintained.

1.1 Transnational Education

Defined by the Council of Europe as, “all types of higher education study programs, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based” [1], Transnational Education (TNE) is becoming an increasingly important contributor to University internationalisation strategies.

In the UK the number of international students attending a UK based programme in 2016-17 was approximately 440,000. This is significantly less than the number of TNE students attending a UK programme at an institution outside the UK which was over 700,000 [2]. Some 84% of UK Universities have TNE arrangements across 228 countries [3].

Reasons for attending a TNE programme include fee levels, internationalisation, career prospects etc. with the affordability being one of the primary factors. The countries most engaged in delivery of UK TNE are Malaysia, Singapore then China [4]. Data on the subjects that are being delivered by UL+K Universities through TNE is less readily available.

HE institutions participate in TNE for a variety of reasons including internationalisation and student mobility [5], to build capacity possibly in response to overseas government initiatives [6], to build a global brand [7] etc. Entering into a TNE relationship is a major institutional strategic decision requiring consideration of “the structure/organization of the collaboration, the location, the scale and scope, the reputation and the brand of the partners, the financial model etc.” [8]. There is an element of risk involved in these partnerships, a factor that is developed in this paper. Table 1 shows a range of the more popular forms of TNE adopted.

Table 1. Models of TNE [3]

TNE MODE	TYPE OF PROVISION	EXAMPLE OF PROVISION
Studying for an award of the reporting provider	Registered at overseas partner organisation – studying overseas for an award of the reporting provider	Where the majority of teaching is delivered in-country Validation and franchise arrangements
Distance, flexible and distributed learning	Registered at reporting provider – distance, flexible and distributed learning for UK HEP award where the location of the student is known to be overseas	Programmes delivered online
Overseas campus	Registered at reporting provider-studying overseas for UK HEP award at overseas campus of reporting provider	Overseas standalone or joint campus
Collaborative provision	Registered at reporting provider, studying overseas for UK HEP award other than at an overseas campus of reporting provider	Joint and dual degrees
Other arrangement	Any other student studying overseas for an award of the reporting provider	Multiple UK or international partners delivering a programme or a combination of other types of provision

1.2 Constructive Alignment

Constructive Alignment is a mechanism used for considering the formal structure of a programme, as expressed through its various specification documents, in conjunction with the learning that takes place through teaching and assessment tasks. Devised by Biggs [9] [10], the principles of Constructive Alignment have largely been adopted by those responsible for creating, delivering, auditing and reviewing those processes, in some cases with information systems used to mediate the process [11].

Most higher education programmes are specified with a set of high-level (programme) learning outcomes. Programmes are usually created by combining a set of modules each of which are defined with a set of learning outcomes (see Fig. 1).

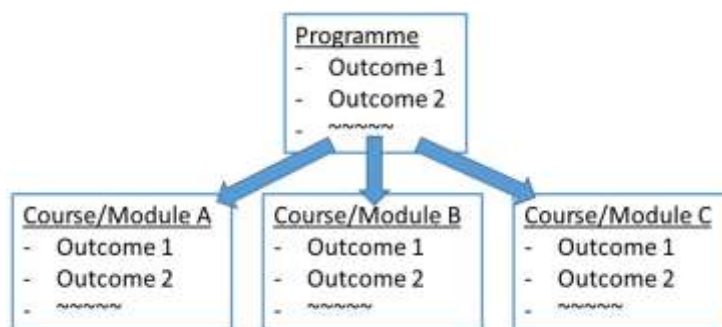


Figure 1. Programme construction

Learning takes place in modules and is normally assessed formally through summative assessment tasks within those modules. Constructive Alignment ensures that through the learning activities and particularly these assessment tasks, the learning outcomes for that module are appropriately satisfied. The further bonding between the modules of study and the programme level outcomes ensures that the requirements of the programme overall are met. Through this process student learning is thereby constructed (see Fig 2).

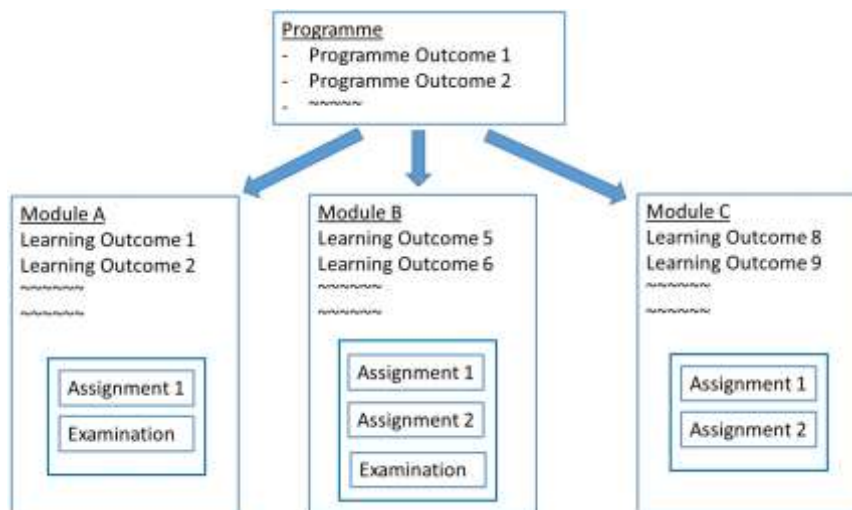


Figure 2. Alignment between assessment tasks, modules and programmes

Alignment between the various components ensures that programme outcomes at the highest-level are evidentially satisfied by the learning activity within modules, in particular through the assessment of learning that takes place [12]. The principles of Constructive Alignment are also regularly utilised at a higher level still to evidence adherence to Governmental subject requirements (as in the UK Subject Benchmark Statements [13]) and to the requirements of accreditation bodies where mappings of Programme Outcomes against external quality assurance statements can be an effective tool in the construction and maintenance of academic programmes [14].

2 METHODOLOGY

The research underpinning this paper has been conducted using a case study approach. It should be noted that the authors are closely associated with the institutional practices and processes of both TNE and of Quality Assurance at one of the institutions documented in this case study and the potential pitfalls of investigation into institutions where one has a close affiliation are well documented [15], [16] [17]. However, utilising a case study approach to develop professional practice in education as proposed by Harland [18] is a recognised approach to furthering the understanding of educational quality, quality assurance and enhancement [19]. The research was underpinned by qualitative methods outlined by Alvesson and Sköldbberg [20] that require the evaluation of practices and assumptions that are grounded in experience and reflexive interpretations to enable a rigorous

evaluative exercise. The researchers conducted evaluations of quality assurance processes at both institutions involved in this study, engaged in interviews with key staff, and performed inspections of regulatory, policy and procedural documentation at both institutions to establish a credible qualitative evaluation of quality assurance practices.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Background to the Case Study

The partners involved in this case study are anonymised: the overseas TNE partner is referred to as OS-Uni and the UK institution is referred to as Home-Uni. The former is a public University in England and the latter operates in the private sector in Malaysia. Both partners are focused on internationalisation putting international student experience and mobility at the forefront of the justification for the partnership activity.

The model of TNE adopted was that of the dual award. This was chosen as it provided the required level of individual quality assurance and control whilst encouraging flexibility and mutual support and a parity of experience for the participants in the partnership. It contrasts with the franchise module which has been criticised for sometimes appearing colonial in its execution [21].

3.2 Curriculum mapping

For any award to be made it is essential that the learning outcomes of the programme and its modules are taught and assessed, and that competence is established. Under the dual award model adopted in the case study a student can study the curriculum devised by OS-Uni but graduate with an award made by both OS-Uni and the Home-Uni. It is therefore crucial that the learning outcomes of both awards are evidenced.

OS Uni Level 1

				University of Lincoln - Level 1										
				Home-Uni module	<div>Algorithm and Complexity</div> <div>Computer Architecture</div>									
OS-Uni module title	OS-Uni learning outcomes		Home-Uni Learning Outcomes	15					15					
Semester 1	Semester 1	Credit												
CUP1015 Programming Fundamentals	CO1: Design and specify algorithms to solve basic computing problems, using flow-charts and pseudo codes.	Comp	3											
	CO2: Write small programmes using selection and iteration to solve basic computing problems.													
	CO3: Write small programs using functions and arrays to solve basic computing problems.													
CUA3015 Computer Architecture	CO1: Describe the architecture of modern computer systems and explain how storage, arithmetic and I/O subsystems interact.	Comp	3											
	CO2: Describe how data and instructions are represented and stored in computers.													
	CO3: Convert numbers between different representation formats, including binary, octal, decimal and hexa-decimal.													
	CO4: Describe the causes and issues of portability problems in computer architectures.													
CUP1003 Fundamentals of Relational Database	CO1: Recognise and describe the main features of the Relational Database model and its architecture.	Comp	3											
	CO2: Use given relational database design (E.g. ERD) and implement it using SQL.													
	CO3: Use Data Definition Language (DDL) for table and constraints creation.													

Figure 3. Excerpt from programme mapping grid

Successful coverage of all OS-Uni modules therefore implies that a student has successfully satisfied all learning outcomes of the Home-Uni programme. In that way a Home-Uni dual degree can therefore be awarded.

3.3 The role of Constructive alignment

Within the assessment diet for each OS-Uni module, the mapped Home-Uni learning outcomes (see the points of intersection in each row in Fig. 3) are required to be covered. Through the application of Constructive Alignment, learning activities in the OS-Uni module might need to be adjusted to ensure full coverage of all Home-Uni outcomes as well as the OS-Uni outcomes for that module. The collection of assessment briefing documents and the examination for that module would necessarily present the union of the set of learning outcomes in the OS-Uni module with the set of Home-Uni learning outcomes identified in the rows relating to that module (see Fig. 3). By iterating that approach vertically down through the list of OS-Uni modules, not only are all the OS-Uni learning outcomes assessed but so are the Home-Uni's.

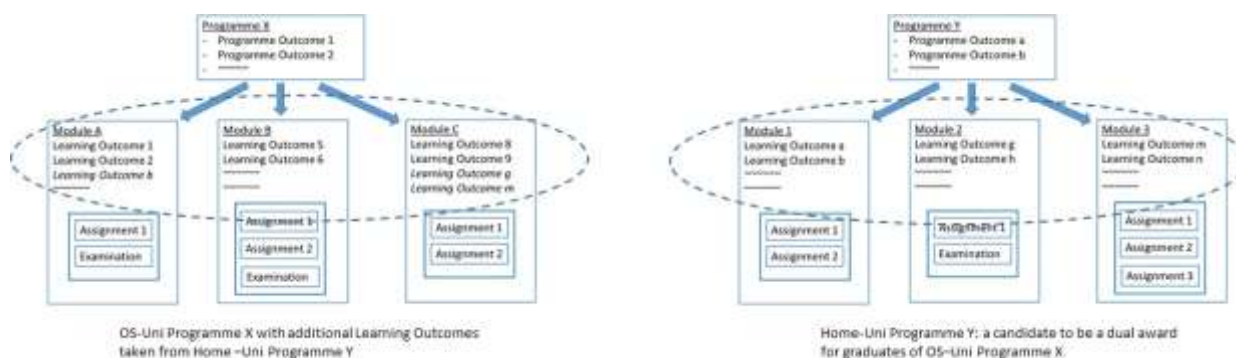


Figure 4. Dual award equivalence

The approach adopted suggests that an award of one institution can be made by the completion of an award at another, albeit with some modifications to the teaching and assessment process. Fig 4 shows diagrammatically how this can be achieved. Modules in Programme X are responsible for assessing their own Learning outcomes (in normal font) as well as the additional mapped Learning Outcomes (in italic font) from Programme Y. Fig 4 shows an excerpt from the process where some of the Learning Outcomes can be seen. In reality the full set of Learning Outcomes from Programme Y would need to appear in the responsibilities of the modules in Programme X.

An additional advantage that is offered as a consequence of demonstrating the equivalence of the learning outcomes of both programmes through a clear adherence to the principles of Constructive Alignment is that it offers a fluidity for the nature and form of assessment types offered at both institutions. Whilst it may be contentious to suggest that the educational experience in diverse locations can ever been seen as equivalent, the trend towards diverse new types of education providers, delivery modes and increasingly more complex forms of educational partnerships has served to hinder and complicate matters of educational equivalence [22] and has been cited as an area of concern in TNE partnerships [23]. This case study suggests that the pedagogic principles of alignment help to facilitate a case for the blending of assessment types across modules and academic institutions in order to allow clearer definitions of academic equivalence to alleviate these concerns. The validity of the dual award is thus dependent upon adherence to standards through quality assurance and moderation processes that do not require repeated justification for one particular assessment mode over another. The practical flexibility this offers both institutions in terms of assessment setting processes is seen as a considerable advantage in the management of TNE programmes.

3.4 Implications for Quality Assurance

In contract to a franchise arrangement where the same modules and accompanying assessment are delivered at home as at the TNE partner institution, using this outcome mapping process does produce additional requirements in demonstrating an equivalency in standards.

To address this issue in the case study, assessment front sheets were adapted to show both the OS-Uni AND the Home-Uni learning outcomes that were expected to be assessed (see Fig 5). This was necessary for three purposes/audiences:

- in devising the assessment appropriately (the tutor),
- in explaining the task's requirement (the student)
- in guaranteeing that the set of assessments cover all the programme's learning outcomes (the external examiner).

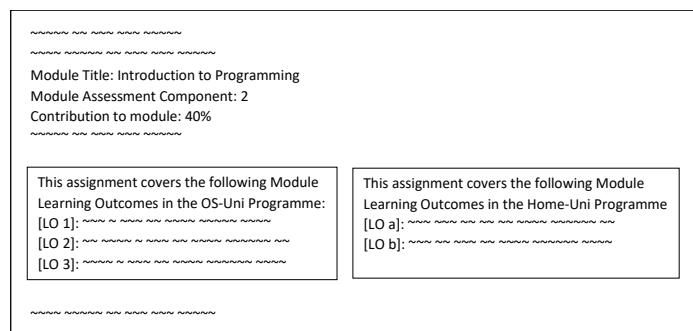


Figure 5. Schematic assignment front sheet

A particular importance in this partnership is placed on the role of external examiners. As in many countries, in the UK the external examiner is invested with significant responsibilities relating to standards. In this case the decision was made to appoint the same external examiner across territories, so the same person reported on the standards for both programmes in a dual award. That meant that they considered the appropriateness of the OS-Uni assessment tasks and student submissions against the learning outcomes of both the OS-Uni and the Home-Uni learning outcomes. To triangulate the findings on standards, the external examiner also looked at tasks and student submissions on the Home-Uni programme. By ensuring that the external examiners are presented with the learning outcome coverage for all assessments, irrespective of the nature or form of the assessment, there has been a clear acknowledgement that the standards across both programmes were appropriate and equivalent.

3.5 Implications for Standards

Constructive Alignment deliberately conflates elements of classroom experience and formal assessment to ensure the effective coverage of a syllabus. This conflates elements of academic quality and standards. This can be summarised as follows: “In any comparison of academic provision, the distinction between academic quality (the nature of the learning experiences of students) and the academic standards (the level of achievement against clearly articulated outcomes) is important to understand. This is even more significant in the case of international partnerships.” [8]. Indeed, in the case of international partnerships there is a potential danger of overlooking culture and environmental differences which could lead to variations in the learning experiences of students across programmes in the dual degree [24]. To address issues relating to the student experience a particular focus was placed on joint programmes of student and staff mobility, staff training, occasional visiting lectures, collaborative student projects, and various for a for the sharing of good practice.

3.6 Summary

The project is now maturing with the first graduates emerging during the academic year 2018/19. The vast majority of students are electing to join the dual award programme rather than just take the local programme. The main reason for this is the greater focus on internationalisation and the access to exchange programmes.

Reports of the external examiners shows that OS-Uni student achievement and progression for those on the dual award is comparable to that of Home-Uni students on the equivalent single degree programme.

4 CONCLUSION

Constructive alignment offers a useful mechanism by which programmes that are intended to be offered in a dual award format can by appropriately designed and then successfully reviewed and audited.

Each programme is defined by a set of learning outcomes – if the set of outcomes that define Programme A can be identified and assessed in Programme B then Programme A is a candidate award to be offered to graduates of Programme B. Constructive alignment can help to ensure that individually Programme A and B can be delivered to an equivalent standard whilst allowing for a level of fluidity in assessment types. A result of this case study is that a horizontal comparison of programmes *at the module level* can provide confirmation of the required coverage of learning outcomes in each

programme. The independent scrutiny of standards by external examiners provides essential verification and reassurance.

However, educators will also be interested in the quality of the provision and the effect that has on student experience. Quality is found more in the “classroom experience”, i.e. how the content is presented and delivered, how learning takes place, how interactions between learners and teachers take place etc. Equivalence in quality is a looser concept than equivalence in standards. Furthermore, in a TNE partnership there are differences in experience between partners and campuses that should be celebrated and exploited for their potential in enriching the learning experience. Having said that there will inevitably be a threshold for quality, sometimes characterised as the minimum expectations for students that need to be ensured. This can be addressed through identification of best practice, joint course committees, programmes of staff development, collaborative activities and experiences etc.

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